HALLOW
HOME

VOLUME 2

HALLOW HOME

"For so long I've felt drawn here. So many tales full of wonders and horrors. No longer could I resist. I just had to see it for myself."

-Quirrel

MODS

Evie | Head & Writing
@evielutione

Dianna | Social Media
@o_montz
@wormdomination

Vanilla | Graphics
@valHamHart

Lecsi | Art & Formatting
@maeberry_arts

AKnightOfAGoodKing | Organization
@flame_chiyo
@the-kings-of-games

COVER ARTIST

bluequills
*@bluequills_*

Check out our Carrd for all contributor's socials

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IN MOURNING
FROLICINQ

"Steady, sibling."

It slid slowly off the saddle of the Old Stag, its legs shaking as it touched the ancient ground beneath. Its sister stood beside, holding her arms out as if she would be able to catch it would it fall. "There."

It lifted its head and took in its surroundings. Broken, decrepit, nothing like it once was. Was this even the same place? "It... will look different than what you remember. Prepare yourself."

They waited for a moment for it to catch its bearings, and then Hornet began moving. It followed dutifully. They passed by cracked walls coated in dust and cobwebs hidden in corners. They passed by corpses of retainers; did they know them, before it all? And then, they came upon it; a gaping abyss where the grand palace of its childhood once stood.

The Vessel came to a stop, staring out into the emptiness. Where... was it? Where had it gone? It wanted to look to its sister for answers, but it found it could not will its gaze to leave the yawning cavern.

"It just disappeared one day." The answer came without needing to be asked. "It, and our father. Nothing has been seen of either since. Not even a whisper."

She walked away. It lingered for a moment still, a flicker of... something, igniting deep within its core, buried well and true, as it was taught. But in that moment, it allowed itself to dig it up. Anger. Flexing its remaining hand, it glared down the empty visage, and turned to follow.

The rest of the walk was short, if not easy. Its shaking limbs did not like to accommodate the crawlids and steep drops. It was no matter, though, both were short-lived. Soon enough, Hornet came to a stop, and so did her sibling in kind. In front of them was a doorway. Huge, black, it gnawed at its very core. Called to it.

"This is it."

Yes. It remembered.

"I cannot accompany you beyond the ledge. I will linger and watch over your journey, though." She

stowed her needle, turning to look at her sibling as she walked through the door. It hesitated.

It remembered. It remembered being on that ledge, blinded by a pale white light. It remembered being whispered to, given purpose, given form. It remembered looking back, and seeing a sibling. It remembered leaving it behind.

"Sibling?" The Princess coaxed. It lifted its head, shaken out of its thoughts. After another long moment of staring, it walked forward to join her.

Looking down, the darkness seemed to swallow everything. It clawed up from the depths and tore at its very core. But it did not scream- not any longer It remembered the shrieking as it clawed its way to so-called freedom. It remembered spending so many hours lying awake hearing its call, before the End. Why was it quiet now?

"It seems calmer now that the Infection is dead." It's sister murmured. "Do you feel it too, sibling?"

Yes.

It took a step forward and peered further into the Abyss. Gnawing, grabbing. Wanting. It prepared.

"Good luck, my sibling."

It looked back at her, and then took the plunge.

Darkness. A journey it had taken so many ages ago, passing by its head and whipping up its cloak. It landed, jumped again, landed. The first of many broken shells, discarded so callously, lie in its path. It was careful to avoid it as it continued on its path.

Jump, land, walk, jump again.

It landed with a thick crunch. Could it shiver, it would have. Straightening up, it prepared itself for its surroundings, and looked around.

Boundless corpses, empty masks, lined the cavern. Beneath its feet, countless more shifted under its weight. Unable to fight it any longer, it shuddered and made its way on unsteady claws to the nearest steady surface.

It shook as it turned to face the graveyard. Time had blurred it's memory, and returning to this place... it was worse than it had allowed itself to remember. It knew the suffocation upon hatching, it knew clawing to the surface, and it knew the excruciating climb to damnation while its siblings fell and died around it. There were so many. Uncountable...

It covered its mask with its hand and looked away. Another shudder heaved through its body.

After taking a moment to gather its strength, it returned its gaze to the sea of broken bodies. What was it meant to do, in the face of all this?

It watched, then slowly kneeled. It let itself heave out a sigh it need not take, and carefully pushed a hand into the surface of the ocean. It lifted its hand, and up with it came the mask of a sibling. It raised the mask to its own and stared at it for a good, long while.

Had this sibling been the one to escape, would it have met its own fate? Would it have been chained to that temple for eternity?

It was glad it was the one to have climbed free.

It closed its eyes, and touched its snout to the mask ever so gently. It felt something break inside it, and void began to pour out of its eyes. It... felt... heavy. So heavy. It rubbed its nose against the mask, pouring all of its regret and shame and love and guilt into the motion as it cried its own ichor into the sea.

It spent a long time nuzzling this mask. It hoped, maybe, if it did so enough, it would bring this sibling back... but no such luck. It heaved another sigh and slowly lowered its hand, finally opening its eyes once more. Tears stained its mask now; it would have to clean that up before it returned to its sister.

ART BY: MACHINE-FINCH

It gently returned the mask to its resting place and stood up. Defeated and sad, it got to its feet and took a last glance around the unending ocean. It knew what it must do now.

The climb back up was difficult with only one arm, but manageable. Easier than the climb down, having to see the corpses slowly come into view from the fog. Now, its sister slowly came into view, a pillar of times changed, of eons survived.

She tilted her head to look down at it as the noises of its ascension finally reached her ears. It met her gaze, then took the final leap.

As it hit the bridge, it dug its claws into the edge desperately before gravity could drag it back down to its first grave. Hornet jogged over and grabbed its cloak, pulling back with all her might, and it finally collapsed on the bridge after a great effort.

"You are inexplicably heavy." She said, catching her breath. It sat up and brushed the dirt off its cloak, then looked at her. "You're back, sibling." She continued. "... How are you?"

It waited for a moment, thinking on the question. How was it?

"Changed."

The Hollow Knight lit the candle atop the counter then carefully scooped it up. Candle in hand, it turned to Hornet, and together they left their abode in Dirtmouth once more.

Together they walked to the graveyard across town, where a new, large stone slab was erected. Tiny bouquets and little candles were already at the foot of it, no doubt left by the residents of Dirtmouth. Right in the middle, however, lay the remains of their last remaining sibling, a mask cracked in two. The little ghost that haunted Hallownest and rescued what remained.

Hornet knelt at the foot of the grave first and set her candle next to the rest. She closed her eyes and bowed her head for a moment, then opened them and stepped back. She looked to her sibling.

The Hollow Knight stepped up to the grave and knelt, just as its sister did. It closed its eyes and bowed its head, sending all of its love into the flame, willing it to burn forevermore, before it opened its eyes and placed the candle beside the broken mask.

Finally, it stood, and stared down at the grave. Hornet moved closer and rested a hand on its arm, then leaned against it in an attempt at comforting. The Hollow Knight reciprocated the lean- if only a bit- and let out a breath it didn't realize it had taken.

Together. Together, they would remain. For their siblings.

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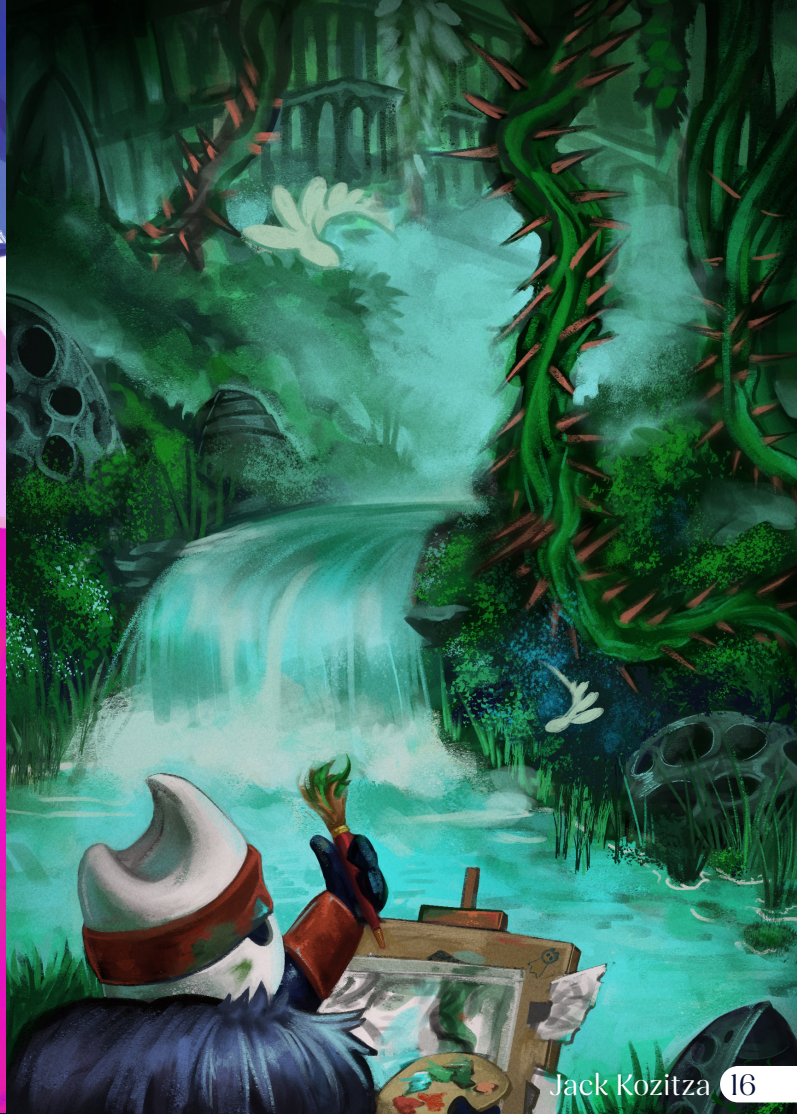
lunathrix

WILLOW WORMWOOD



THE ERA OF AN ARCHIVE

SnapdragonsYearRound

Quirrel watched as light waves rippled across the lake's surface. He could just barely make out the shape of the small knight, who had accompanied Quirrel by the water's shore, in the distance, dashing their way across the lake. They had been kind, listening to Quirrel's musings.

They had been even kinder before. When they had helped Quirrel slay the teacher he had sworn to protect.

For Quirrel, his life before his travels was still murky. Like a vial clouded by thick ink. But as he stared at the ripples of Blue Lake, a scene played in his mind. For the movement of the water was like that of Uomas and Oomas, gliding across an ever-growing Archive.

Quirrel hummed as he turned the relic over in his hands. Ordinarily, one would not 'hum' among scholars absorbed in texts. But the rules here were different. There was always sound, in the Archive. Whether it be from the Oomas, the Lumaflies, or one of the many experiments the Madam was working on.

It was distracting, at first. They were still dangerous creatures, and Quirrel had taken to bringing his sword with him, which was currently propped against his desk. But after many months and years working with the Madam, Quirrel had grown accustomed to the sounds, to the point where he found it comforting. Even as he frowned at the stone in his hands.

"You needn't be so frustrated, Quirrel," the Madam said. "All research worth pursuing is one worth pursuing with patience."

Quirrel turned in time to watch Monomon glide toward him. One of her luminescent arms, half-hidden behind her cloak, reached out to squeeze Quirrel's shoulder. "You have been studying that artifact for weeks. Perhaps a change of focus would do you good."

Quirrel sighed. "I know it would. But this is the only artifact we found near Blue Lake! There isn't anything else we can compare it to, and I..."

Monomon tilted her head. Her mask, with a finely carved expression, always made her look serene. But that was not enough to hide the chuckle as she said, "And you are wise enough to know when to end a pursuit, my apprentice."

Quirrel's shoulders sunk. As per usual, the Madam was right. There was little to be gained by studying the artifact. But even so. "It's just disheartening. There's this whole civilization that was here before us, and we know so little of it! Isn't it heartbreaking to know that what they knew, who they were, has been forgotten?"

"It is," Monomon said. "But such is the cycle of life And remember, if their era had not ended, ours would never have begun. Though we may strive to remember what we have lost, that should not distract us from what we have now."

Gently, she tugged on the artifact Quirrel still held in his fingers.

Quirrel let her take it.

Art by: cm _

"Now." Monomon placed the stone on Quirrel's desk. "Let us go to my lab. I have a hypothesis I would like your opinion—"

"GRAAAAH!"

The scream was the only warning of the attack. By the time Quirrel had spotted the Husk Hornhead, the bug was already charging toward Monomon. The Madam spun at the last moment, but the Husk's horn had pierced her cloak, pinning her to the wall.

Quirrel pushed himself out of his chair. With a twist of his feet, he snatched his sword from its place against his desk. Monomon tugged at her cloak, but as the Husk pulled its horn out of the wall, the motion tangled the fabric, making it impossible for Monomon to free herself.

The Hornhead twisted and charged.

They met Quirrel's blade.

The Husk stumbled as the horn cracked upon contact with the sword. With a stretch of his arm, Quirrel sliced Monomon's cloak, freeing her from the bug. The Husk turned and charged again, but Quirrel was ready. He parried the first attack. The second, he was unlucky, and the Husk clipped his left arm. But at the third attack, Quirrel lowered his stance, dashed forward—

And sliced the Husk in the side.

The Hornhead fell with a thud.

Quirrel spared the Husk only a moment—enough to see a strange orange glow fade from his eyes—before he turned to his teacher.

"Madam!" Quirrel rushed over to Monomon, careful to keep the edge of his blade away from her. "Are you harmed?"

"I am fine, Quirrel. But worry more for yourself!" Monomon pulled off the remains of her cloak and went about bandaging Quirrel's arm. "Does it hurt?"

Quirrel shook his head. "It does not, Madam."

"Then it is adrenaline carrying you through it."

Quirrel stayed silent as Monomon went about tending to his arm. By now, commotion had spread through the Archives. Other researchers had come into the room, asking questions Quirrel and Monomon did their best to answer. Someone went to fetch a guard. Another yelled about informing the White Palace.

"Madam..." Quirrel said. "What was that? That glow... I've never seen anything like it."

Monomon finished binding the makeshift bandages around Quirrel's arm. She looked at the Hornhead, lifeless on the floor, and whispered, "I... I don't know."

Quirrel gasped as the force of the memory sunk into him.

That was the Madam. His Teacher. The woman he knew he trusted, who had called him to Hallownest. Quirrel suddenly remembered details of her that had been lost to him. How gentle she was, even when correcting her pupils. How she preferred studying relics than studying the blade. How Quirrel knew that, if anything happened in the Archives, he'd be the first to defend her. For he was a warrior, while she was not.

"Madam, I remember," Quirrel said softly. "I thought you began to study the infection after meeting with the King. But you... You must have started your investigation that very day."

Quirrel's fingers tapped against the hilt of his blade. "Madam, why must this duty fall to you?"

"It did not 'fall' to me, my apprentice," Monomon said softly. "This task is one I chose. And one I chose willingly."

The Archive was never quiet, but today was different. While no one could silence the ever-present Lumaflies, there was no talking, discussing, or humming. The scholars that were usually hunched over their desks were now lined up in front of a large tank, where their mentor and teacher would spend the rest of her life. The only noise they made were hushed whispers, restrained sniffles, and quiet sobs that echoed off the walls.

"Why must it be you?" Quirrel asked. "Are you truly more valuable to us when sleeping? I—We need you here."

Monomon placed a single luminous arm on Quirrel's face. She turned him toward her, even when Quirrel tried to plant his gaze on the floor.

"Quirrel. When I told you of Uumuu, did you not train for days on end? So you could pierce its shield in case it ever chose to attack me?"

Quirrel tightened his grip on his blade. "I did, Madam."

"When I journeyed to the White Palace, did you accompany me? In case I ran into any infected citizen on the way?"

"I... I did, Madam."

Monomon's arm brushed the edge of Quirrel's mask. "And when I asked you to leave Hallownest with my mask, did you not accept the task immediately? Even when I begged you to consider it thoroughly, for you would be leaving your home?"

"I did." Every instinct in Quirrel made him wish to look away. But he couldn't. Not now, when Monomon needed him. She needed to know that Quirrel could keep his promise, and Quirrel would show her that he could. "Madam, must you make everything a lesson?"

Monomon chuckled. "It is not on purpose. But... if this is the final lesson I am to impart, then it is one I do so gladly."

She turned to the room, taking the time to look at everyone before her. "I know this is trying, for all of you, but I have faith in every one of you. You are my pupils. My legacy. And I know you will all make me proud, no matter what happens. Remember that. And remember what I taught you."

At last, Monomon looked back at Quirrel. She gripped the edge of her mask, the final security measure that would keep her safe while dreaming, and said, "Are you ready, my apprentice?"

And without hesitating, Quirrel replied, "I am, Madam."

Quirrel laughed. "How is it," he said, "that the few memories I've recovered make me awe in wonder?"

It was improbable. Near impossible. There was no reason for Quirrel to remember so much, nor why he remembered those moments in particular. But, whatever the reason, he did. And they only furthered the peace Quirrel felt, staring at the shores of Blue Lake.

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"I know my time has come," Quirrel said aloud. "But what is it you said, Madam? That, if one era had not ended, another would never begin?"

Quirrel pushed himself to his feet. The blade in his hand, which he had used to strike down Uumuu, felt heavy.

"Madam," Quirrel said. "Thank you. Thank you for your kindness, your wisdom—everything you did for us. And... thank you, for giving my life a purpose."

Quirrel looked at his blade. Just like Quirrel, its purpose was done, and its time had come to an end.

With a swish of his wrist, Quirrel sunk the tip of his blade into the ground. It stayed there, upright, and Quirrel turned away. He did not look back, and his steps did not falter. He simply walked away, leaving his blade—the one he used to protect his teacher all those years ago—at the shore of a beautiful blue lake.

22

Night 23

@lucika.
TRON

HELP DESK
RAINBOW SCARAB

"There's your book. Return it in two weeks. Bye."

Kinti watched the bug scurry off as fast as she was sure he thought polite. She could've tried to have been too, but she could tell he'd've been intimidated by the Archives' only mantis no matter what she did.

She sighed, getting her bearings again. There was more work to do. Even if that work was standing at a desk waiting for a patron to need something. And she didn't have to wait long.

A new patron walked in. Fluffy green wings topped with even greater fluff around the neck, long, soft antennae...that was a moth, wasn't it? A first since she started her work in the library. They were clearly unused to the space, looking around, going back and forth, checking the lines of shelves. Surely they saw the big "help" sign over her desk. But whether they came over or not, she may as well do her job.

She got out from behind her desk and approached the moth.

"Need any help?"

The moth jumped, apparently unaware of her approach. They recovered quickly though.

"Ah...no. No, I'm just looking, thank you."

"Oh. Okay. Mmm...I'll be right over there." She pointed to indicate her desk, before returning to it. That was that then. They seemed on edge. Another who was uncomfortable with her. Whatever.

She dug into a stack of reading materials she had behind her desk for the slow times. The Archives had so much knowledge, and she wanted to know it all. What today, aquifers? Breadmaking? She was just picking up the tube on mushrooms when she looked up to the sight of the moth, right in front of her desk.

"Changed your mind?"

They nodded. "What do you...have on gods?"

"Hmm, let's see..." She got to her terminal, an acid tube display set up on the desk, and entered the subject.

"Anything more specific? The Pale Beings, Unn?"

They glanced quickly to each side before leaning closer, speaking softly.

"Related to moths?"

"A...moth god?" She hadn't heard about anything like that before, but entered the keywords. And then tried 'higher being', 'deity', 'religion'...'Resting Grounds'? 'Crystal Peak'? Oh!

"I found one. But..."

"But?"

"It's restricted. You need proper authorization to access it."

The moth's face fell.

"Can you tell me anything about it?"

She hummed, turning the terminal so they could see. "Sorry. Even the catalog entry is redacted."

The look on their face was one of anguish.

"You can fill out a form to request access if you like." She started leaning towards the cabinets on one

side of the desk, but was interrupted quickly.

"No! ...No. That won't be necessary."

She paused. "How about...a mailing address to inform you of the subject if anything new comes out?"

"No. No forms."

Kinti looked over the moth, and realization dawned. She'd never met a moth before now, but they were spoken of as not fully Hallownestian—outsiders. They were far from home, farther than she from her home village, seeking restricted knowledge. It wasn't her they were scared of.

She leaned in closer. "I'll look into it. If you come back, ask for Kinti—I'll tell you personally if I find anything."

There was nothing like this in library policy, but she couldn't regret the look of relief that came across their face.

"Thank you. I...I won't forget it!" They turned around and walked out, looking much lighter on their feet.

Kinti's mind swirled with how to actually fulfill what she offered. But she didn't have long to dwell.

Another bug was coming into the library, heading for her desk. And then more, as child after child appeared trailing in a line.

"Afternoon!" The apparent mother drew her attention back to the front of said line. Her voice

carried a melodic quality, even as it sounded tired underneath. "I'm looking for the book 'A Case Study in Soul Use'?" She read off a note in her hand.

Kinti nodded and entered it into the terminal. Some of the children were pointing at her and staring. She gave them a smile and a wave back. Childish curiosity couldn't offend her.

Momentarily a match appeared on the acid screen. ...Ah.

"Um...I'm sorry. It looks like this article has been deemed lost."

"Lost?"

"Yeah. Checked out and never returned." The checkout history was private to patrons, but she spared a private moment of judgement for this "Soul Master". The name had come up before, in the same context. She could only imagine what hidden basement of stolen books he must have.

"Oh...what a disappointment. Thank you anyway."

Unlike the moth, this bug filled out a request form for a new copy. She rounded up the children, and Kinti couldn't help but count (15 in all!!) as they filed out behind their mother.

No one else came in for a good while. Kinti finally had time for some of her own reading.

The article she selected was one of Monomon's older ones. She hoped she could learn from it. About the topic, sure, but she also aspired to be a real scholar someday, not just working at the library desk.

She'd study from the best.

The article was even older than Kinti thought. The Teacher acquired a fungal sample from a tram worker, but that old project failed long before she was born. Still, for her, the subject of the article brought about more recent memories. She'd had her stint at the border same as any other mantis. She recognized the pale, glowing mushroom, by its features if not its cited name.

Monomon speculated on its nature. Tested it for relation to mushrooms of the Wastes (none found). Asked if it's how the beasts of Deepnest survived without a guiding Light. Kinti didn't know. Her only thoughts at the time were of gratitude that the glow could bring some relief to the gloom. To Monomon it had been something distant she had never experienced in the wild, enthusiastic to learn about the unknown. To Kinti it was something common, viewed at from another angle.

These were the reasons she was here. The deep well of knowledge and learning and discovery the Archives had to offer, put down into an ever growing collection of records. The reasons why a short trip away from her village turned into permanent relocation. Her fascination did not stop. Even if she barely felt like she fit in, she wasn't here for that. She was here for the books!

She had to wonder if there had been any newer scholarship on Deepnest as well.

So absorbed in reading and her own thoughts, Kinti didn't notice the shift in the atmosphere around her.

She didn't notice patrons and coworkers alike leaving. Only once her desk was approached did she look up from her reading.

Kinti froze as her mind processed what—and who—was before her. It was bad enough that one of the two was Monomon. Her boss's boss's boss. Catching her so absorbed in reading she hadn't noticed her approach.

Worse was the figure besides Monomon. Beast Queen Herrah herself.

Sudden flashes of an announcement at the start of her workday—"special guest", "early closing", "tour"—went through her mind, far too late to be useful.

Words failed her. She could only stand there, article in hand, as she stared up at the two figures. Those two were not struck with the same affliction. Monomon put a tentacle up to her mask as if to hide a mouth.

"Oh my. There's someone left."

"It would seem so."

Kinti could hear the mirth in the Teacher's voice, but it was drowned out by her focus on the Beast. Her people's long enemy. A predator to make any mantis warrior feel small. She could just imagine the sharp fangs that mask hid.

"While you're here...how about you help our guest."

Kinti looked to Monomon, and then back to Herrah. The guest. Oh my gods the guest. Herrah was the special guest.

"I dunno...do you think she can handle it?"

"Herrah! Our staff is well trained. I'm sure she can, can't she?"

Kinti just wanted to melt. Perhaps it would've been better had the queen decided to eat her.

"Alright. Show me."

Kinti nodded and took Herrah's request silently, not trusting her own voice. She looked up the materials and rushed off to collect them. Monomon knew the Archives better than anyone, could've helped the Queen faster, she was sure. But now Kinti was part of the tour and she would not let her Teacher down!

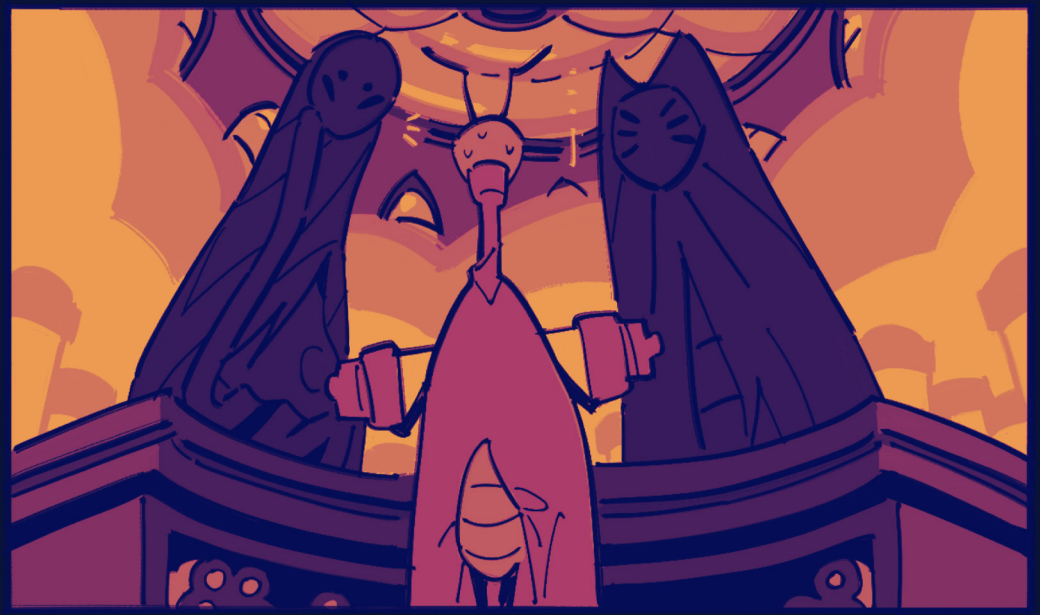
Even if that meant facing the Beast Queen.

She returned with a stack of records in her arms. Herrah looked them over and selected a few to check out, and soon it was all over.

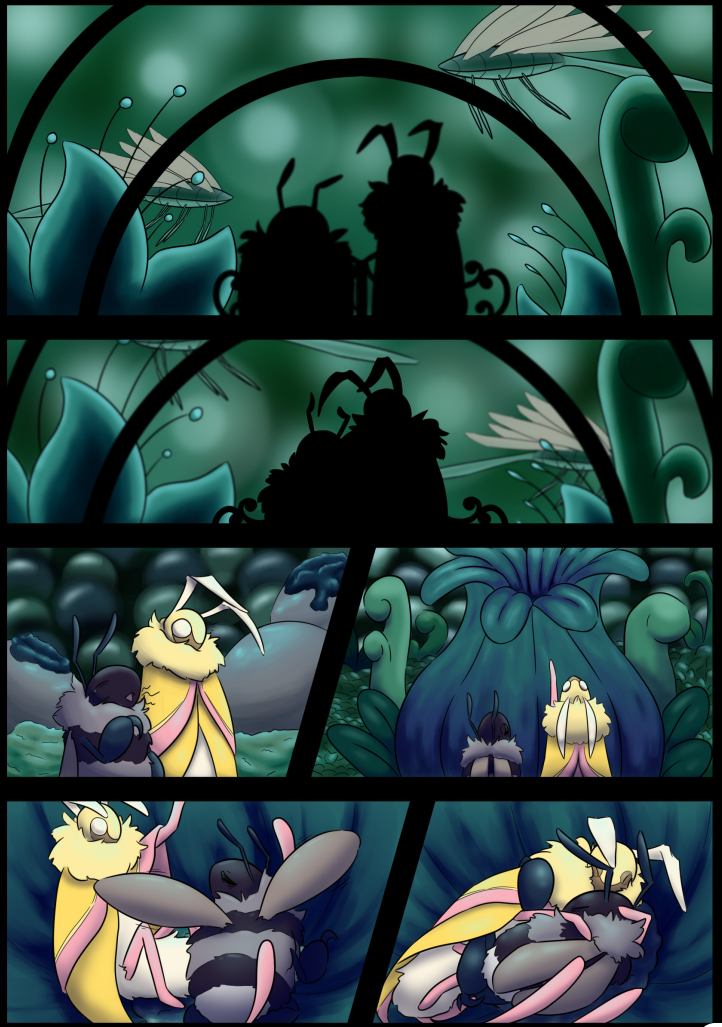
The two were walking away, talking, laughing. Monomon offered to lend Herrah a record player for her checked out materials. It would stick with Kinti for a long while.

But in the moment she only had one question.

What did the spider queen need with children's songs?



Art by: Charli.JPEG



MENDERBUG'S ADVENTURE

PEACHDOXIE

ART BY: LONELYSHEEPLING

Dearest Diary,

Tomorrow starts one of the grandest days of the year! I'm going to the Fungal Wastes! The Menderscouts report some strange new damage to the signposts dotting the Wastes that I get to fix. The only thing that would make this better is if Mender Berri could join me. But I wouldn't dare take her away from mending the statues in the Resting Grounds. She loves mending them as much as I love mending my favorite sign.

Dear Sweet Diary,

It's been a long and tiresome day hauling my supplies through the Wastes, but a satisfying one! I made it all the way from the upper entrance to the eastern caverns outside of the Mantis Village. Like usual, they're letting us Menders sleep on the bench so long as we don't try to enter the Village itself. They seem tense, though. Maybe they should give mending posts a try!

I took my time on the way down here making notes on each piece of damage, and wow, the Mender-

scouts weren't kidding! I counted 38 broken posts and signs—that's nearly all of them in the eastern caverns. Some were broken in the normal way, but others were crumbling into bits like the end of a piece of charred wood. What could do that to metal and stone? I've stowed a sample to show the Grand Menders when I return to Mendertown. Perhaps they know.

Oh, Diary, speaking of the Grand Menders, I checked the sign at the end of the Pilgrim's Way for damage, and it's okay! Phew! It's one of the few remaining examples of art from the Late High Wayfinding era of Hallownest! But between you and me, I'm a bit disappointed. I would've loved to watch the skill of a Grand Mender in action! They're the only ones allowed to mend such rare and delicate pieces of art.

I ought to get to sleep. Fixing signs starts early for me tomorrow!

Cherished Diary,

I'm taking a break for lunch at the end of the Pilgrim's Way, and you'll never believe this! Someone activated the ancient bridges outside of the City Gates! They weren't like that yesterday! I didn't dare walk across them. Though they looked steady, we Menders have been forbidden from fixing anything beyond the end of the Pilgrim's Way and I didn't want to risk them breaking. The Menders of the past were great at their jobs, but acid has a funny way of corroding even the strongest of metal, and it's been so long that we don't even have records of the last Mender to touch them.

But Diary, I must confess, I'm starting to get nervous. Usually fixing things helps calm my nerves, but I just can't settle down. First this strange damage, and now the ancient bridges are activated! And the stoic Mantises are fretful, which can't be a good sign.

Ah well. I can't spend too much time worrying about it, not when I still have so much to mend. There's always a danger to leaving Mendertown, after all. The best I can do is finish my work so I can get home to Mender Berri!

My Loyal Diary,

I'm back at the bench outside Mantis Village for the night, though I don't think I'll be sleeping much. Something has the Mantises all riled up. One of them almost skewered me before they realized who I was! From the whispers I caught, it seems that something important was stolen and then someone actually fought the Lords and won. Now that's scary! No Mender alive remembers the last time the Lords were defeated in combat.

(But we do remember that they won't let us fix the throne belonging to the Traitor Lord. They won't even let us give the throne the dignity of a respectful decommissioning! They sure are a strange lot!)

What's more, the sign for the bench I'm resting on was broken again, even though I fixed it this morning Thankfully, as you well know, Diary, I had packed enough spare parts to repair the sign several times over, so no problem there.

Still, I hope I don't find anything else broken tomorrow. As much as I would love to continue mending in the Fungal Wastes, I do have a schedule to keep!

Diary, My Friend,

I'm back in Mendertown, and I have news for you! I saw the bug that's caused the strange damage I told you about, and you'll never believe it—it's the same bug that keeps breaking my favorite sign! I saw it dash its way through the Crossroads and attack the Vengeflies with a burst of...well, I'm not sure what I saw, but it was a terrible darkness that sent a shiver across my shell. Once the bug was gone, I investigated the statue it broke and found the damage identical to what I found in the Fungal Wastes!

I can't help but wonder if this is the bug that fought the Lords and won. With that darkness, I imagine it must be a formidable foe, even to such warriors as the Mantises. It scares me a bit to think of a bug running around with that much destructive power, but at the same time, it's exciting! It's not every day that we Menders get to figure out how to fix a new kind of damage! The Grand Menders are already scheming away.

It's not too late here in Mendertown. I think I'll stop in to say hi to Mender Berri and take to bed early tonight. I have the feeling we Menders are going to be very busy bugs these coming days....

SHADOWS OF ERAS PAST

ASTORICHAN

ART BY SLIMES

Grief is an odd feeling.

An aching absence, a sorrowful melody, a wound weeping love yet trying to keep it all inside. He's seen and gone through his fair share of grief – enough so that the lingering wisps of crimson light do not tear him asunder.

Beneath the steady pitter-patter of rainfall, he reaches out for the crackling flame coiling and twisting in mid-air. It clings to him in turn, impossibly alive under the onslaught of water and time alike. Its warmth cannot be explained by anything but the mess of stubborn agony it is woven of; its perseverance is a testament to strength and an admission to weakness at the same time. He expected it – there are always smouldering embers left after a wildfire – yet it is unpleasant to witness all the same. Like a stain that cannot be washed away, memories linger in the place of their demise, crying out for help that will never come.

What are you doing here, little one? Why tarry where all your pains stem from? he wishes to inquire, gentle like the flame thrashing in the air does not expect. Yet speech would be a desecration to this place of ruin, and otiose questions have no place in a moment of mourning.

And so, he coos – a melody, perhaps a mocking comfort to the tangle of grief swivelling in front of him. His summoner nudges the mass of scarlet essence with their nail, inquiring without words: "collect?"

Collect.

He breathes in; not for the scent of charred embers cutting the heavy veil of rainfall and bouncing off rusted platforms underfoot, but for something much purer. Grief does not smell of smoke - it smells of haemolymph and burnt carapace, of rotting flesh and sickly-sweet infection. Of course, it does: this kingdom has fallen prey to his sister's radiance, after all.

The flames engulf him, their heat entwining with his own – fuelling one another, his essence dances with the mass of lost anguish and desperate will to live; and he feasts.

He feasts on the spires stretching to the cavern's ceiling. He feasts on the noise all around him, voices lingering in this world much beyond the bugs they once belonged to. He feasts on the grief, bitter and sharp - it is not unlike consuming tiktik shells, not unlike being impaled by crawlids, over and over again. It aches right where his absent heart lay, and he embraces the pain – he *lives* it, every shard of loss Hallownest's capital city is not yet ready to let go of.

The soft blue fog gives way to gleaming silver. *It hasn't always rained in the city*, a discordant choir laments. *It used to be glistening with riches, not tears.*

It is like being dragged in every direction at once. Never is he so wanted as during the consumption – never is there such endless need for the herald of terror as when hundreds of voices cry out at once, desperate to be heard in their searing hatred. He lets the swelling tide guide him through the narrow streets where the scents of spices once mixed into an unholy concoction - *but we'd much rather that than the emptiness, we didn't mean it*; onto the large central plaza where feet stomped feet and chatter spread deafening – *we'd talk and listen away days, anything but the silence;* and into the elevator where pheromones' closeness bit antennae in a discordant, clustered mess of sensation – *there used to be so many bugs here, alive, together, unbroken-*

He halts atop one of the spires, *where the insufferable nobles licking the King's robes once resided*, and breathes in. The choir is never the quieter, yet many a voice of grief hesitates with a horribly familiar inquiry frozen on their minds:

Is this all my fault?

Grief is an odd feeling. Its veil makes colours shift – in place of hatred reigns tender ache, grasping for anything left to love.

He does not have the impudence to speak, nor the compassion to reassure. Any words would be empty in the face of this question, and so he offers knowledge instead: it is not the commoner's hatred that brought Hallownest unto ruin. It is not annoyance with life that chases it away. Hallownest had not fallen prey to contempt, just like these poor bugs have not fallen prey to loyalty.

Grief is an odd feeling. How can an absence ache; how can a lost limb hurt?

His efforts do not satisfy them. Not that the indif-

ferent distrust is shocking, but still – his hopes are crushed in the blink of an eye, and the choir of grieving embers picks up the tempo once more. One-two-three, one-two-three, like an ardent dance he is an unwilling part of. On the upbeats, the world shifts before his eyes; on the downbeats, the voices all plead with him, desperate-

Then what did *ruin Hallownest?*

How expected the question and the pain to crash into him, leaving him breathless and ablaze. But he is not new to burning – he's been set alight many more times than he can count anymore.

Even the pyre smouldering with too many agonies to count cannot get close – for *many* are not *all*. The embers' anger bites his senses, shrouding the world in a horribly familiar stench: rotting carapace a testament to the horrors that had taken place, spilled haemolymph a reminder etched in ink much too precious for its waste, the flame struggles to consume him from the inside out. It gnaws; it claws; it thrashes and wails, setting his feeble body on fire – he has naught but a rasping, awful squeak to show for himself, and who is to say that noise is not reassurance?

What ruins kingdoms? Lies woven into beautiful tapestries; greed draining cities' lifeblood and castles' stability; fear searing away the resolve to fight, fight, fight for their bare lives.

The embers calm. The city of tears shines through once more, spires shattered like the promises of its foundation; he stares at the husks prowling about, wills theirs no longer yet loyalty undying. To the cracked pavement once kissed by something much more important than silver light: loving steps. To the broken windows where candlelight will shine nevermore. To the overgrowth kept prospering by loneliness, choked some places by the rot and destruction, yet unbroken.

It can't end like this, the discordant chorus pleads. Oh, how many a time has he heard this plea, drenched in horror and love alike – who, who will be there to care about my home when I'm gone?

But he can promise one thing, and one thing only. To every of the lost souls trapped within the scarlet flames he consumes, he always promises the same thing; to every forlorn undead now trapped in a nightmare of their home gone and their efforts useless, he has the same solace to offer.

To you, common bug having once lived at the very foot of the Pale Spire; to you, common bug to have defied his sister's deceit for so long you've watched your family decay from within, brittle shell one final place of rest instead of the comfortable bunk bed those grubs once shared.

To you, stag routes worker having witnessed your only friend decline, memories corrupted by the searing sunlight until legs broke and saddle was a formality of the ages past.

To you, devoted butler whose lord had tasked you with the impossible shard of his own impossible burden; to you, dear friend whose hopes of being awaited on the other side must be crushed, for your will has kept you shackled much too tight.

To you, lost wisp of flickering light without memory of yourself – only one of your love, imprinted much too deep to ever be undone.

To you, little scholar to have helplessly observed your friends perish in chase of rotten eternity. To you, mentor who'd bore witness to your students' corruption by forces opposing yet entwined in their malice all the same.

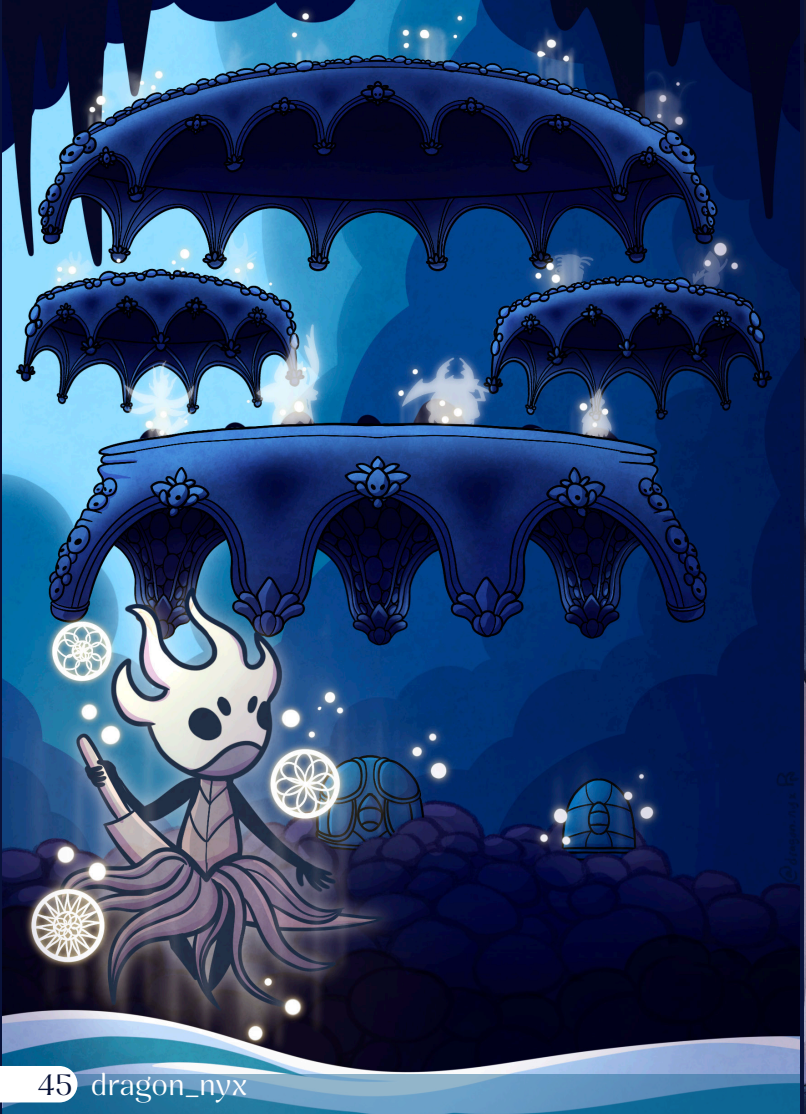
To you, and you, and you...

It is a cruel mercy, but nothing has ended. Do you see the overgrowth piercing the paths paved in decayed carapaces and pyres' ashes? Do you remember what stood there, what lay in the nameless graves you have rejected?

The embers grow hotter. He squeaks once more, expectant – his wings tense, flinging wide in a mocking invitation for an embrace. He has no salvation to offer, no relief to gift – such is not his nature, scarlet flame, the bane of lands forgotten and decayed.

He will remember, though. He will remember lovers' tender touches, a balm to exhausted carapace; he will remember mornings' greetings, silver light streaming into windows half-shut. He will remember the noise to have once plagued the dead streets; he will remember hatred for the more fortunate. He will recall it all, Hallownest doomed to live on a fiery visage of a kingdom destroyed – by hate, by lust, by indifference and overconfidence, he will keep its reflection alive in nightmares, the only place to outlast the mightiest foe of all: time.

But within the confines of Hallownest's cavern, he will rest his smouldering wings and marvel at the rainfall erasing all remnants of home never to be returned to, never to be embraced, never to be forgiven and never to forgive its prodigal bugs.



THE KING'S SERVANT
MACHINE-FINCH

1ST BELL

The morning comes too soon, as it always does. Yet, it is still a marvel to meet it in bed, writing by the lantern light slowly growing brighter outside my window. It did not seem long ago that I was the one walking the corridors and courtyards, coaxing the lumaflies to wake. Now, I get to lay in the warm blanket nest almost until the 1st bell has finished its chiming.

What a luxury. I doubt I will ever take it for granted.

As I am about to rise, there is another new comfort that unavoidably comes to mind – this room itself. Never before have I had an entire space all to myself. Of course, His Majesty has always been generous with the accommodation for his servants, none of us would find it in themselves to complain... But... I admit, it is good to be able to close the door on the rest of the palace, to have somewhere I don't need to listen to anything but my own thoughts.

Especially now.

–

The mood greeting me in the servant's dining hall continues to be enduringly sombre. I do not exactly miss the constant clamour of giggling pages, but it is disheartening to see this quiet seriousness on their small faces. My customary table companions were equally glum. We barely exchanged any words, although that is not unusual.

ART BY: FROLCINQ

Sometimes I wonder if the only reason we gravitated towards each other is because we do not fit anywhere else - too common to sit with the noble-born staff, too high of rank to sit with the commoners.

~~The hierarchy and rules of the palace had always been a steadfast guide but sometimes~~

3RD BELL

Tasks for the day:

- Assess the new staff.
- Finish inspection of the north wing.
- Complete procurement forms for the polish and feed.

They finally fulfilled my request to add a few extra hands to the department. The novices seem so eager to prove their worth as to be almost fearful. A posting in the palace has always been both prestigious and demanding, but Wyrm knows, now it is also the safest place in the kingdom. Still, this eagerness will prove useful.

...I just wish they would stop using my full title.

–

"Master of the Lights" has always seemed too lofty of a role to wear for a common bug like me. It would be more befitting to His Majesty's priest than a simple servant.

–

~~2~~ 3 lanterns on the third floor of the north wing need complete replacement.

–

...At times, I admit, I entertain the thought of my work as a dedication to His Majesty. There isn't much a mere mortal can do to repay him for his gift of mind, but perhaps being a keeper of his palace's lights would make for a worthy attempt.

...

My father would have slapped me for this arrogant thought.

He had spent his entire life scrubbing the endless halls of the palace, knowing it for his life's duty, never complaining nor considering himself above those further from His Majesty's light.

And here I am, thinking myself better.

...

Thinking too much was always my folly.

6TH BELL

The midday meal. The entire palace is tense as a bowstring. Barely anyone is touching their food as we wait for the arrival of the messengers. The news from the rest of Hallownest is rarely good, but any news is better than this silent waiting.

–

I have left the servant's hall early. One of the maids (I am afraid I do not remember her name) was crying while the others tried to comfort her. It seems that her home settlement had been struck by the plague.

In times like this, I am glad to no longer have any family to speak of...

A heartless thing to think. Yet it is true.

After my father died there was no one else left to call kin. Maybe the palace staff should have become my family... But even after growing up amidst them, I cannot help feeling the distance separating me from the rest. If it is not social class or rank, then it is something innate in me, something not quite right...

Perhaps I should have stayed and tried to help the poor maid.

...

The tears always made me uncomfortable. I do not understand how one can break down openly like this. If I ever felt a need for it when I was younger, I would seek out a deserted room or some quiet corner.

Thinking about it makes me once again grateful for the refuge of my room.

Now, I have been blathering enough, it is time to get back to work.

At least it offers a distraction.

8TH BELL

The Hall of Vines inventory:

- 12 large standing lamps
- 6 large hanging lanterns
- 21 small hanging lanterns

Most of the lanterns are still in good shape, however, some of the harder-to-reach hanging ones have not been properly maintained. I shall speak to my staff about it.

–

The sight of the great halls standing empty, the lanterns shrouded in their white covers, the branching vines unadorned with decoration.... It makes something in my chest clench. Even now, I remember hiding behind a tapestry with the other servant children as we watched the hall sparkle and gleam, hoping to catch at least a hint of the Majesties among the noble guests. All those rich fabrics, the swirls of dye on chitin, the smells of food we could only imagine tasting...

...

Best to not get lost in the memories. The entire kingdom knows, now is not the time for parties. Yet, since Her Majesty left for the gardens, the palace barely sees any public events at all. Even the royal court hasn't been held in full for a few years now...

With most of the palace left in shadowy waiting, my duties are made easy – inventory and maintenance, instead of the constant race to keep every hall aglow.

Still, it's hard to be thankful for this respite when the empty silence waits behind every corner. The plague is far from the heart of Hallownest, but it is impossible to forget about it even here.

~~Would things ever return to how they were?~~

~~What if the plague reaches us?~~

~~How many more will...~~

I trust in His Majesty's plan. I trust that his Pure Vessel will save us.

12TH BELL

Whenever I need a cure for the arrogance of my position, the paperwork happily provides. Perhaps the ability to deal with all the endlessly complicated bureaucracy is what the nobility breeds for.

...

The tiredness seems to make me brutishly bitter. Just a few more forms and I will be able to finally retire for the day.

—

I am...

I am back in my room.

I...

I... I was making the rounds.

I do not need to anymore, but the habit is hard to break. When the lights are covered, the halls' silence does not seem out of place. It is peaceful.

...

How could...

The door was left open! I thought... Those guest rooms have not been used for a year now. I thought a maid had forgotten to lock it or the pages were causing trouble again...

How could I have known?

...

It was just standing there.

I could have believed it was a statue, but it turned to face the light from my lantern. Its eyes were completely black, devoid of any expression. I could not move, I...

I heard about it, I had seen it beside His Majesty...

But not like this, having found some dark corner to... To...

And I must have been out of my mind with shock because there was no other reason why I... I should not have, should not have said what I said, should not have called them, it...

Your Highness.

...

It flinched.

For a moment only, but I swear I saw it.

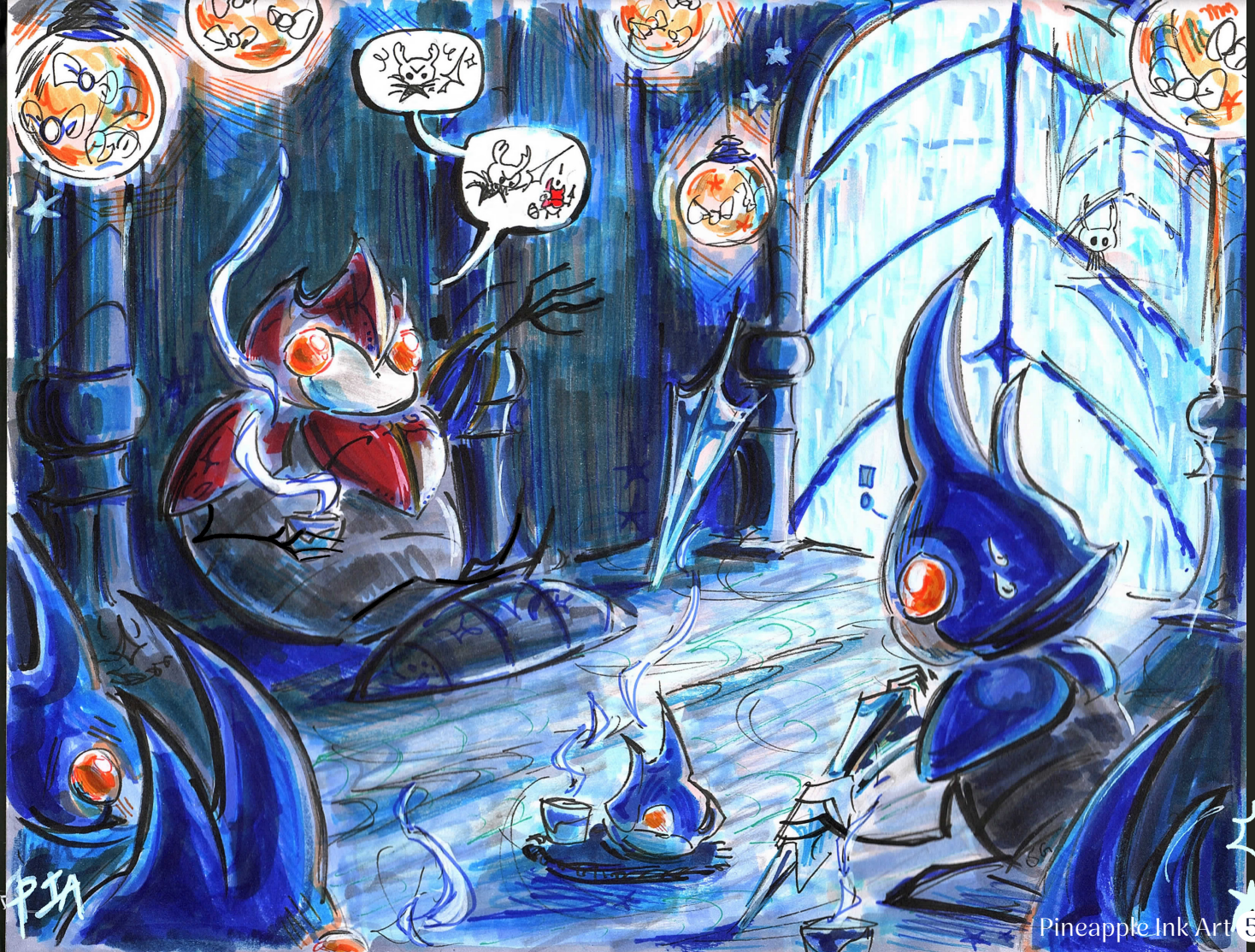
As if I struck them.

I left then. Did not bother to finish the rest of my round. Just came straight back.

I am glad no one can see me now.

I am glad...

I am glad I have my own room.



BARELY BREATHING (BUT STILL ALIVE)
REVEKS

"Revek, sir! The suspect is passing Row Four as we speak! Shall we pursue?"

Revek remains seated on the rocky outcrop jutting from the wall, his nail in hands, a third running a cloth up and down the blade while the fourth taps the stone in a repeat rhythm. His eyes stay trained on the polishing of his blade. A soft chitter escapes his covered mouth, one of questioning.

The two guards before him shift from foot to foot anxiously, awaiting his response. When none comes, the shorter of the two turns to the taller.

"Should we... ask again?" they whisper, glancing between their compatriot and the guardian.

"No need." Revek stands, tossing the cloth behind him and hiding his lower set of arms. He rarely lets them be seen, but sometimes, these guards just sneak up upon him. He adjusts his cloak, pulling the hood up over his horns. It's ripped and worn, but it's one of his very best, and he's grown to love this particular one. "I will handle it. Wait outside the Glade— I will be just a moment."

He turns and stalks away from them, waving them off with a clawed hand, nail tucking into its sheath at his side. The waterfall at the end of the cavern burbles softly, but to him, it sounds off.

It churns, it's angry, it asks "Who dares step upon terrain not meant to be traversed?" The Glade is meant to be empty of all life— no, he does not count— and even one throws off the balance.

The suspect is a scrawny cockroach, clad in tearing leather, accented with little rusting metal pieces. A thin spear hangs precariously in its straps, loudly clanging against stone with an ear-piercing noise that would bother any other bug. It's a miracle they have made it this far, with how clumsy and inexperienced they seem to be.

Experienced or not, Revek has a job to do, and so he pounces.

The cockroach lets out a startled scream, barely whipping their spear around to meet his nail with a clang! that sounds louder than it really is. To them, Revek looks like a cloaked warrior competing for their steal, so they waste no time reaching into their pouch,

unsheathing a dagger with a slight twist of their hand, and plunging it into his arm.

The feeling is instantaneous, and he grunts as it registers. But while he is many things, he is not a failed guardian, so he ignores it and sweeps a spindly leg forward. It catches on the roach's, taking theirs out from under them as it goes by, and they fall, letting go of their spear and their dagger. The latter is ripped out, tearing its way through exoskeleton with a strange sound. Like leather being punctured.

It. Hurts.

Revek vaguely contemplates that his arm is losing its vital life juice as he searches inwardly for the word to describe what he's feeling. He does not let his emotions show often: he is used to the stoicism that comes with being the guardian of such a sacred place.

"If you ever get hurt, if you're ever in pain, step away immediately. We don't want you to die on the job— that would just look bad!"

Revek finds the word. Four letters. Single syllable. Yet, the biggest word he could fathom:

Pain. The sensation is pain.

The dagger returns. They've stabbed again, this time aiming for his side and striking true. Revek snarls, a borderline feral sound, one that would reveal his spider nature had the four eyes and arms not done so already. An irritated click escapes him, then continues until it is a rattle. He trembles, pushing back onto his nail and driving it through the roach's neck.

Or rather, that is his intent. His aim is off, hindered by his blurry vision, and the tip of the Gladenail sinks into the dirt instead. His third and fourth arms slip out from under his cloak, grabbing the roach's arm, wrapping around their wrist, squeezing. He's strong— he's a spider— and that's all this robber needs to know to look absolutely terrified.

"Let go," Revek whispers.

They do, scrambling back, out from beneath him, face shining with tears and antennae drooping. "I'm sorry!" they cry. "I didn't mean— I just— I didn't— you—"

"Get out," Revek hisses. His instincts are screaming at him, searing in his head with painpainpain. He doesn't watch them go. Instead, he closes his eyes, trying to ignore the strange shrieking noise registering to his ears, one that should not be in the Glade, and pulls the dagger from his abdomen.

It drops to the floor, as does he. By the time Markoth gets to him, he realizes the screaming is his own.

"Make him stop screaming!"

"Revek, please!"

Revek locks his jaw but can't stifle the sound of agony, the *burningburningburning* radiating out from his abdomen and swallowing him whole. He can barely make out the forms of Markoth and Thistlewind above him, pressing a silk bandage to his wound, trying to stifle the stream of blue.

He lays on a bed of silk. His armor had been stripped away, revealing his stained chitin, one spot splattered where the blade had bitten deep. He is swaddled in a way that prevents him from doing worse damage, arms pinned beneath blankets.

The tent flap flips, and heads turn as Seer enters, cloaked in simple gray robes that ripple like smoke. She knees beside the cot, brushing a wing over Revek's face. "Be still, child," she murmurs. "The pain is the body's cry for help. We will quiet it soon."

Revek opens his mouth to form an apology or perhaps a plea, but no words come. He winces as Seer's hand, surprisingly cool, traces the wound.

She extends her hand toward a nearby table, and Thistlewind hurries to place a shallow bowl of water in her grasp. Seer dips her hand in, the water trembling in her touch. The liquid shimmers faintly, then darkens, as if absorbing the shadow of pain itself.

She spreads the water over the wound in slow, sweeping strokes. Revek lets out a soft cry, but then his breathing slows, evening out into something gentler. The wound begins to knit together, tiny particles shaped like dreamcatchers twirling around it.

Seer places a hand above the wound, and her palm begins to glow faintly—golden, warm, pulsing in time with Revek's heartbeat. Seer's eyes narrow, but she does not falter.

Minutes pass, or perhaps hours—it's difficult to tell. When the glow fades, the room is brighter. Revek blinks, his eyes clearing, the tremor in his limbs stilling. He gasps softly as he feels his side, where chitin once split, now slowly stitching itself back together.

Seer swats his hand away and presses her hands together. Then, she sways slightly, catching the edge of the bed for balance. "You will live," she whispers, offering him a faint smile. "But life is fragile—remember this moment and be wiser for it."

"Thank you, Seer..."

She inclines her head. "No thanks are needed. Only a promise that you will not waste what has been mended."

Revek tries to sit up, but exhaustion threatens to overwhelm him, so he drops back down. "And the thief?"

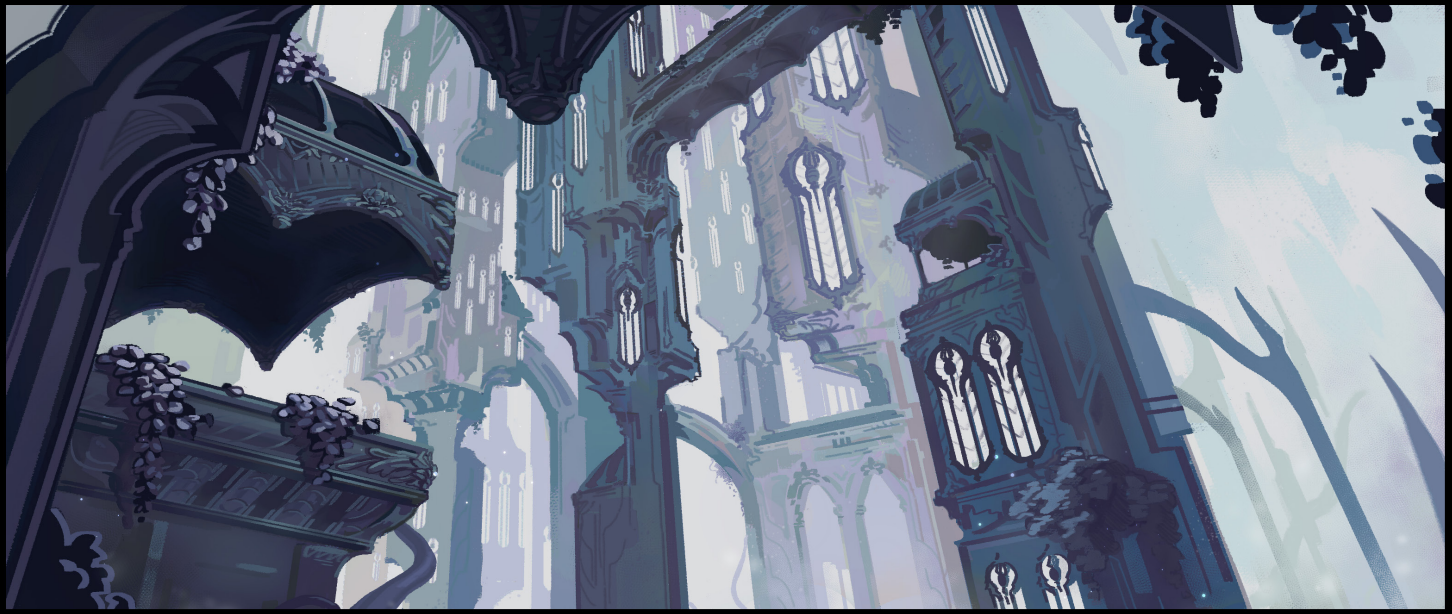
Seer looks at him from over her shoulder. "They will have their own wounds to deal with."

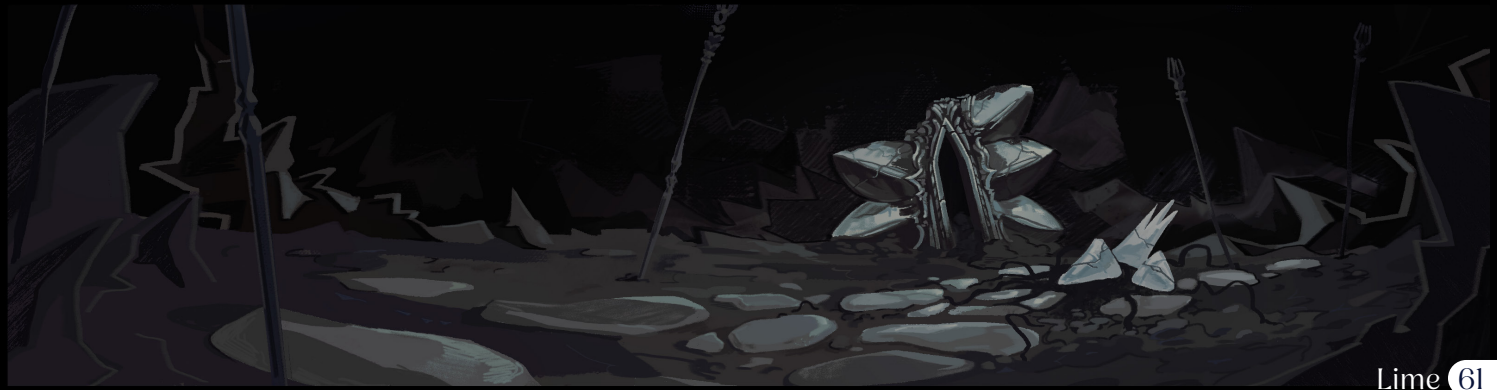
She shuffles away then, moving to prepare tea. Revek watches her go, feels over his wound once more. He lets his head fall back.

"Thank you," he whispers.

Seer smiles.

Art by: Willow Wormwood





WE DON'T NEED TO EAT AT THE COLOSSEUM, WE HAVE FOOD AT HOME.

VAULTBUGGO

ASH WAS FALLING ON KINGDOM'S EDGE. Quiet, cold feather-puffs, the moult settled over disemboweled chitin and archaic corpses with a mortician's touch: laying gentle lines in harsh cliff-cracks, powdering barren ground as if smoothing away the death in the land. Nothing was spared from its obsession. Carcass, teeth, roots – all were capped by the false snow, blurring together as the whistling blizzard grew in strength. If this storm persisted for another three hours, Bardoon thought they would finally approach something like burial.

And yet. Despite the quiet of suffocation, the cold of a beckoning sleep, activity stirred below. Deep below. Three were fighting. Not with nails or teeth, as so often fought in this land, but with words. Strong words. So very strong they could be heard above the whistling wind. They bickered, and chittered, and waltzed about each other so loud that Bardoon wondered if he ought to climb higher.

And they said:

"—WOULD YOU GIVE ME THAT!"

The cry could rival gusts of soul breaking on chitin; its very baritone trembled with rage. With footsteps of a bug twice his size, the bellower marched up and grabbed the napkin from the offending hand.

"IT'S DRAIN," he continued, practically vibrating the ash around him in volume. "—THEN, DRY."

His two compatriots gave each other a look in response. Oro, who had been in that moment 'drying' the hopper-femur, rolled one shoulder. "I was doing that," he thundered back.

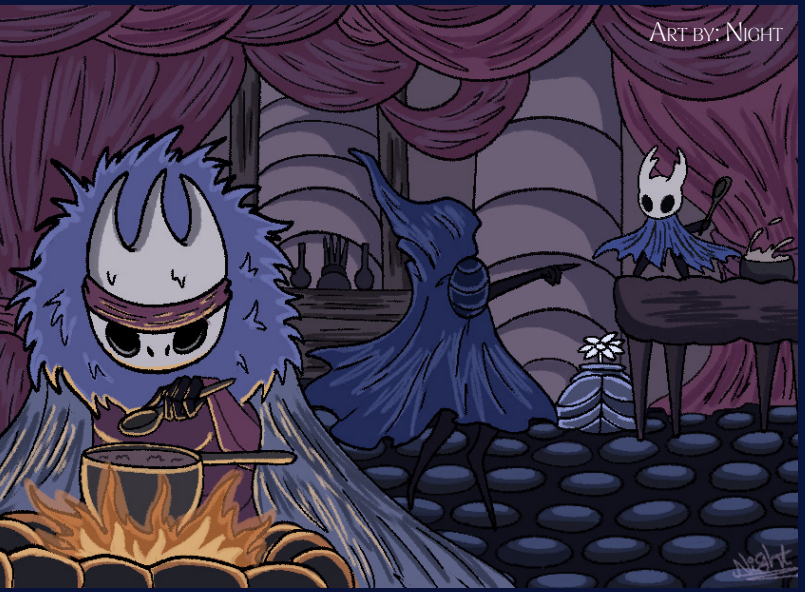
Tiso sniffed. "You were mashing it, you cur, you brute: look, it's practically concave!" The femur was uplifted and waggled before the Nailmaster's nose. "How am I supposed to ma—OY!"

A distraction. The ghost of Hallownest was stirring the marinade; or perhaps it was better to describe the sight as attempting to utilise a wooden spoon as you would a nail. The bowl, whose contents sloshed dangerously about, spat a clot of curd into the ceiling. The Ghost eyed the dripping offender, then leapt up to grab

it. Upon some consideration, they then tried to shove it back into the sauce.

"DON'T," Tiso boomed, and struck out with the spoon.

The ghost of Hallownest dodged adeptly. Days of travel within the danger of the dying Kingdom had made them slippery, but this stick of butter had met their match. Tiso struck out again, then again. Marinade splashed. Sauce sprayed. Oro retreated to a safe distance where the curry lay abandoned on open-flame, and crossed his arms.



Eventually, a fatal mistake was made; the Ghost cornered themselves on a table. Hope seemed nigh as Tiso advanced, chitin bristling. "Your size makes you fickle, but we may have use of you as an appetiser," he growled. "Now, stay still and let Tiso –!"

"—ant," Oro tried to interrupt.

He was ignored. "—do not even think of climbing the curtains," Tiso told the Ghost's frantic gazing about.

"Ant," came the snap, louder.

"—and for the sake of all, stop wagging that spoon around—!"

"Tiso."

"—for gods' sake, WHAT?!" the blue connoisseur spat and spun around.

Oro did not need to reply. The sight was obvious enough. From where the curry sat on the stove, a sudden blackened haze had emerged. Fumes as thick as an armoured squit's chest swallowed the hut's ceiling.

It took a moment for Tiso to realise what was happening. Then, with a yelp, Tiso grabbed the curry pot and ran out of the hut. A wet splash and sizzling noise followed. After a considerable sixteen seconds,

the ant returned. Boiling red curry dripped off one side of his body.

Oro fought laughter with every inch of his being.

It wasn't well-enough. Tiso's eyes narrowed to slits. The ant said, with considerable tightness, "Did you," which came with such a squeak that honestly, *put that ant in the opera house,* he could probably hit those high notes. "Did you *not* think to *take* it off?!"

"The agreement was that I would observe the curry, and follow your instructions to the trim," Oro hummed back with a malicious click of mandible. "At no time did we agree that I was to participate beyond an occasional stir."

Tiso's mandibles gnashed back. "I should use your vocal strings as flavouring."

Awkwardly from behind, the Ghost flicked another curd off the spoon. The fire spluttered, irritated embers spitting from the rock-circle on the hut floor. The hopper-femur, abandoned on the counter, laid undressed and plain.

"So, are we to remake it?" Oro offered with some dark glee.

Tiso's chitin twitched, a full-body shiver of rage. Still, his mouth remained clamped shut. With considerable deliberation, the ant wiped off curry from the side of his body and flicked it at Oro. The sauce did not entirely make the voyage to Oro's face, but the intent was there.

"No," the ant finally spat. "No, I've had enough, I think. You win. Colosseum food it is."

Later, standing on the outskirts between bloodlust and fallen warriors, the little Fool would make mention of the smoke he had seen before. "It was quite magnificent, seeing some black amongst the snowy grey," he told them, even as he handed over the skewers of greasy goodness. "Quite a sight, quite a sight. Do you know where it came from?"

Oro held his tongue – which was fortunate, as Tiso's furious glare may have cut it right off. "I was too far to see it," the ant lied, even as his curry-stained cloak indicated his guilt.

The little Fool blinked. Then, he turned to Oro. Beneath him, the Ghost held up the greasy skewer and began to wave it as one would a wand.

Oro reached for his skewer. "No," he said, and that was that.

TISO'S CURRY RECIPE

TO MARINATE

½ (1.1 lbs) hopper-femur, scooped (cut to 1 ½ to 2 inch)

2 spoons curd (maggot best)

¾ spoon salt (use as needed)

¾ spoon pulps paste

1 spoon hopper-eye, whisked

½ spoon acid-leaves (adjust for heat preference, leave out for low heat)

TO MAKE THE CURRY

2 spoons oil

3 path-fruit, pureed or chopped

1 cup path-thorn, finely chopped

1 to 2 acid mushrooms, slit or chopped (leave out for low heat)

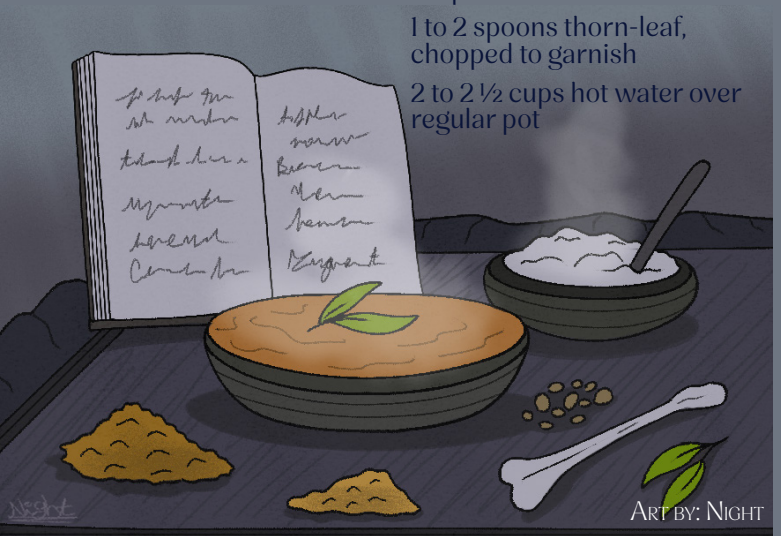
2 spoons hopper-eye, whisked

2 sprigs acid-leaves or 1 wing (optional)

½ spoon salt or as needed

1 to 2 spoons thorn-leaf, chopped to garnish

2 to 2 ½ cups hot water over regular pot



Art by: Night

FOR MARINATE

- Marinate hopper-femur with curd, salt, pulps paste, hopper-eye and acid-leaves for minimum 30 minutes. Preferable overnight.

FOR CURRY

- On low to medium flame, gently heat oil in pan / pot. Add the whole spices: path-thorn, acid-leaves and wing, followed by path-thorn & acid-mushrooms.

- Sauté until path-thorn turns transparent. Lower the flame to very low as much as possible / remove pot from fire. Then transfer the marinated hopper-femur and sauté for 5 to 7 minutes.

- Stir in path-fruit and hopper-eye, followed by path-fruit.

- Increase heat and sauté for another 5 to 7 minutes, until raw flavor of path-fruit is reduced. Pour hot water & mix very, very well.

- Bring to gentle boil & let cook for 1 hour 30 minutes. Stir well every fifteen minutes, pour more hot water if needed.

o DO NOT LET ORO NEAR THE POT

DAUGHTER OF DEEPNEST

HopeStoryteller

Hornet isn't fond of what Deepnest has become without her mother, though she scarcely recalls what Deepnest was under Herrah the Beast. She was too young, aware of little beyond her mother holding her close and often. She didn't yet know the circumstances surrounding her existence.

Her birthplace now bears little resemblance to the fragmented memories of a childhood cut short by necessity. Now, Deepnest is only inhabited by the dead and those that should be. She stalks past those once devout to her mother, creeps past corpses without turning her back, and stays well away from familiar faces leading her to dark corners.

She hasn't the time, desire, or ability to reminisce. Deepnest was dangerous in her mother's time. It remains so today, even amid the throes of a plague that puppets nearly everything—nearly. After so long, a carefully-honed nail cuts through the cobwebs and Infected towards a distant village. And Hornet follows, at a distance, with her needle.

The little ghost of a sibling she never should have had doesn't seem fond of Deepnest, either. But their trail's simple enough to follow, after a few false starts. Their strength lies in combat, though it didn't always. They're not much for subtlety, perhaps paradoxically for being without a voice or a mouth to use one.

(Shortly before their previous meeting, Hornet would nevertheless swear she heard a shriek from within the inky, Void-ridden depths of the Abyss. Not long after that, her should-be-dead sibling crawled out of their birthplace, sighted her standing at the precipice, and nearly tripped back down the way they'd come.)

Her sibling makes for the Beast's Den. Hornet follows. They don't know she is there. They can't know that the Dreamer in question is her mother, and so she waits outside after their entrance for as long as she dares.

Though not often, only when she had to, Hornet has returned to Deepnest since Herrah began to Dream. She hasn't dared enter her Den.

Consequently, she's thoroughly unprepared for the sheer weight of nostalgia once she steps over the threshold. In a better world, a kinder world, she would

have lived here with her mother.

(In a better and kinder world, Hornet herself wouldn't exist. Knowing that truth makes it no easier to bear.)

Gripping her needle tighter, Hornet presses on, into an antechamber she scarcely remembers yet feels terribly familiar. Chandeliers hang from the high ceiling above.

Surprisingly, the antechamber *isn't* deserted. Eight masks turn, facing her as she approaches. She recognizes none. Not from her childhood here, nor from her adolescence with her father, learning of the ancient sins that led to this.

The mask-wearers don't *look* infected. They aren't attempting to kill her on sight, which would be a refreshing change of pace if it wasn't deeply suspicious. Even before the Infection, Deepnest was a lethal place for those calling it home, a lethality only compounded for those foolish enough to visit.

As much as Hornet would have liked it to be, once upon a time... Deepnest never was her home. It never *could* be her home, not when it was her mother's. All Hornet did was take Herrah from it, in a desperate gambit that didn't even work.

"You," she says at last. "Who are you?"

"Greetings," says one, standing beside a bench.

"You are very tired," says another. "We are friends."

"Sit and rest," says the third. "Sit and rest."

That is *obviously* a trap.

...Hornet can see how others might fall for it. Desperate for something, anything to serve as a refuge against the horrors outside, they would take the first kindness offered, not recognizing it as false. There is little kindness anywhere within Hallownest's borders, these days. Certainly not within *Deepnest.*

"Must I," Hornet says, "to see the Beast?"

There is no response but a host of blank stares. Hornet wonders, not for the first time, what is behind them. Is this Herrah's defense, to Monomon's creature and Lurien's knights? How hasn't it fallen to the Infection?

(Had her mother known, or suspected, that the Hollow Knight wouldn't be enough to contain the wrath of a goddess spurned? That, when the Infection reemerged, it would target those guarding its bindings first? Hornet gathered long ago that her father and mother bore no love for each other, only a mutual

desire to save what little they could from annihilation.)

Cautiously, she approaches the bench. It reeks of poison, and is largely covered in dust. The part not covered in dust is precisely the right size for a certain little ghost. Poison, she imagines, would have affected them little.

However, Hornet is *not* made of Void. She'd rather not knowingly poison herself.

When she zips up, briefly checking for the passage that must be there, she finds nothing. This is the only way forward.

She sighs, and resigns herself to her fate, and sits. The mask-wearers, whatever they are, approach.

"Well?" Hornet says. "Do your worst."

They stop.

"You bear the blood of the Beast," says one, in the same detached monotone as before. "You are her daughter. You are Hornet."

Art by: bluequills

"Yes." Hornet inhales sharply. "Yes, I am. I can't... I don't... I'm sorry."

There is a noise of an opening passage far above, yet her mother's defenses come no closer. She won't be poisoned. Her mother knew she might come back.

Somehow, someway, Herrah the Beast *knew.*

(Hornet feels no better about this situation.)

"Go," the eight say in unison.

Hornet stands. She asks, "Did Herrah... say anything? ...For me?"

She can't and wouldn't have, she certainly *shouldn't* have. And yet, maybe, if she *knew...*

Nothing but silence. Hornet should have expected nothing less. She looks up, gauging how much silk she'll need to reach the passage...

"She loves you."

"Very much."

"If you are here," yet another continues, "then she has faith in you to do what you must."

Ah. Hornet understands too well. Beneath her mask, there's an uncomfortable, unfamiliar wetness

she doesn't normally allow herself to feel.

"There is little I wouldn't give," Hornet replies, "for her to know that I love her, too."

The mask-wearers don't respond. Neither does Hornet.

(As she zips upward, she hears several quiet *thuds* behind her. She doesn't dare look back.)

Though she'd intended for the little ghost to beat her there, Hornet isn't prepared to watch them swing an ethereal nail at her mother's motionless body. She's just in time for them to collapse to the floor beside Herrah's bed, like a puppet with its strings cut. She doubts they're aware of knocking over multiple candles in their fall. She doubts they'd complain, if they were.

The little ghost mildly terrorizing what remains of Hallownest will get up again. Her mother, Herrah the Beast, will not. But she never *could* have; that's simply how Dreaming works. They had to remain, living yet not, for the rest of time, or else the great plague would return.

(But she's already breaking free. Better to strike preemptively, to still have a *choice* in what comes next. Hallownest is already in shambles. Hornet's father had been insistent that the Infection without the Hollow Knight holding it back would be catastrophic. Though that was before he vanished with his palace, leaving Hornet to pick up the fractured pieces of a kingdom she was never meant to lead.)

Was it intentional on the ghost's part to leave Herrah for so long? Or was it simply a consequence of the village being so far away from everything else?

...She's certain what her father would want, if he were here. A strong enough blow would rouse them from the realm they—and her mother—are in. But he is gone.

If she were to follow his guidance... what then?

Hornet cannot kill them in any way that matters, something that daunted her considerably more back in Greenpath. She's since accepted that aspect of their existence, and committed to this path. Now, she must stand by and let them murder her mother.

Nothing that crosses her mind convinces her otherwise.

She sits, resigning herself to waiting. The least they can do is make it quick.

Hornet doesn't have to wait long before her mother fades away. It's slow, the fading; Hornet hopes that it's faster on Herrah's end. She doesn't dare hope for anything more.

The seal is broken. Herrah's life thoroughly extinguished. Hornet wishes she could say she was prepared for this. She wasn't.

With her piece said and her further intentions made clear, she fully expects the little ghost to leave her to mourn. This they do, dashing off in a burst of crystalline speed.

She doesn't expect the little ghost to return, quickly, like they've changed their mind. They look her up and down, considering. She's still taller than them, slightly, even seated.

"What is it?" Hornet asks, exhaustion seeping into her words. More than anything else, she's tired. But she knows neither of them can rest yet. All she can allow herself is a moment to mourn the mother whose sacrifice was in vain.

The little ghost doesn't speak; they never do. Regardless, they step forward, a decision evidently reached. Before Hornet can protest or fully register what they're doing, two small arms wrap around her in a surprisingly tight hug.

Hornet's first instinct is to stab them for their sheer audacity, not that it would stick. Then again, they know that. She's assaulted them enough. It likely wouldn't even make her feel any better.

So she exhales, allowing it to happen, and tries not to think of how long it's been since anyone was close enough to hug her.

"That is enough, Little Ghost," she says after a minute. To their credit, they do stand back then, though they don't leave at once.

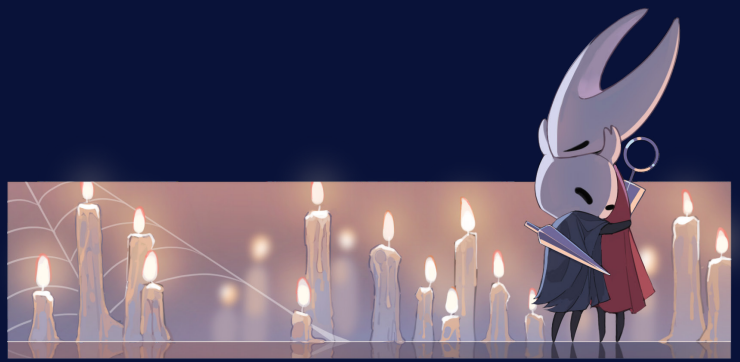
They aren't hollow. That much is obvious. Their will could hypothetically be broken; their father would have considered it weakness. But their father is long gone.

What happens next isn't her decision to make, nor should it be. She'll assist if she can, but she cannot linger within the Black Egg for long, even with the seals broken.

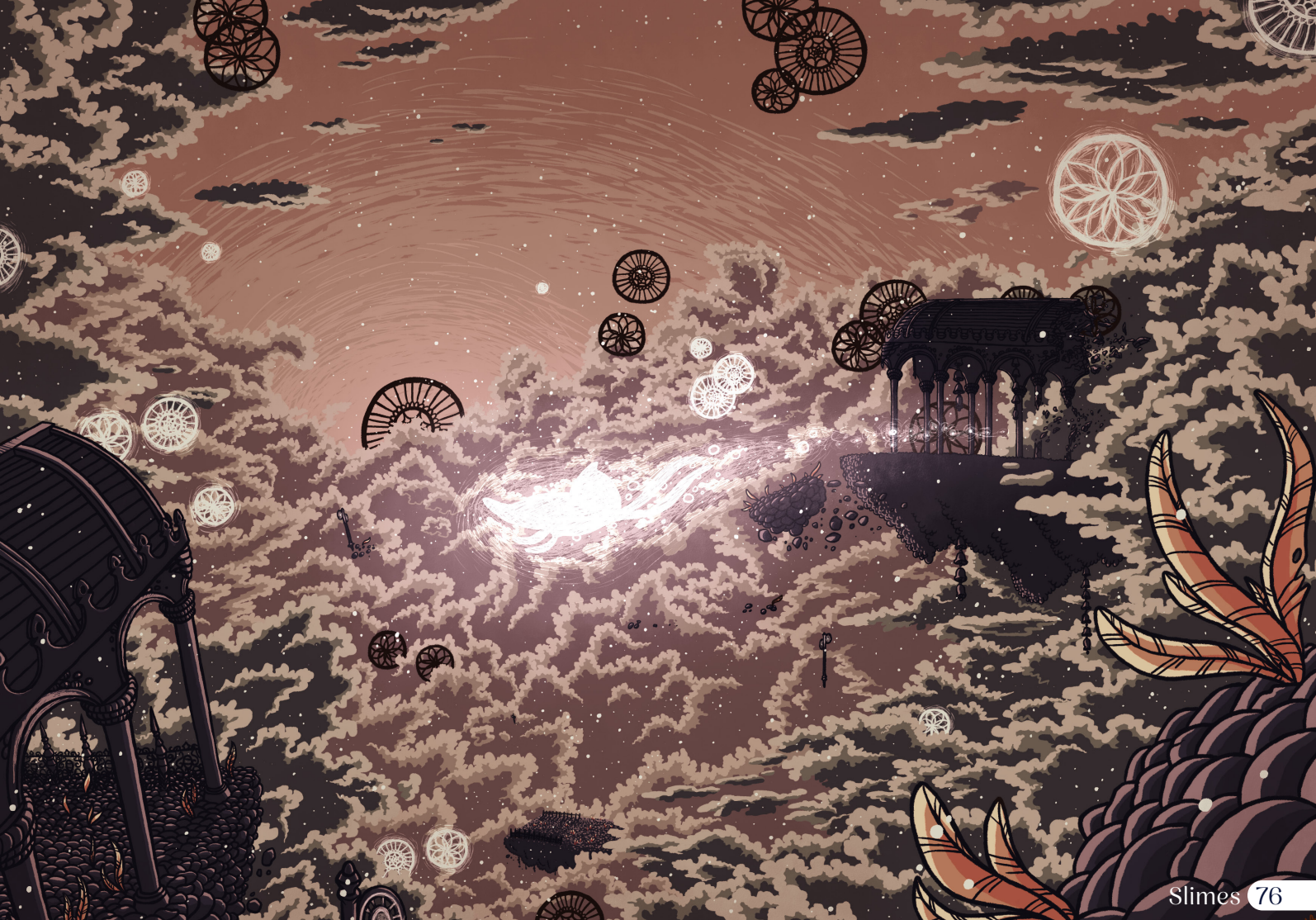
This time, the choice will not be hers. It's almost a relief. Whatever they choose, it's more likely that *something* of Hallownest will survive than if Hornet continued along the path set for her.

She'll follow Ghost's lead, when the time comes. Soon, they'll be prepared to kill the past in the name of the future.

At least one of them can.



Art by: BLUEQUILLS



VOLUME 2

HALLOW HOME

Thank you for reading!